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AUTHOR Hernandez, Donald J.
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ABSTRACT

Changes initiated by the United States Bureau of the Census to data collection on family relationships in the decennial census of the population, the Current Population Survey, and the Survey of Income and Program Participation are reviewed. In the last 5 years, innovations have centered on developing new approaches to identifying the array of family relationships within households and to developing new approaches to analyzing recently available historical and contemporary data on families. While most of these innovations improve the data collection process, not all can be construed as progress. In the 1990 census no marital history data will be collected, which will mean the loss of an important opportunity to explicitly identify parent-child and husband-wife relationships in society. (SLD)

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SPECIFYING FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN THE DECENNIAL CENSUS AND CENSUS BUREAU SURVEYS

by

Donald J. Hernandez

This paper was prepared for the annual meeting of the American Statistical Association in Washington, D.C. held August 6-10, 1989, for the invited session titled "Statistics on the Changing American Family: Recent Innovations and Continuing Dilemmas." Donald J. Hernandez is Chief of the Marriage and Family Statistics Branch, U.S. Bureau of the Census. The author wishes to thank Arthur J. Norton, Arlene F. Saluter, and Robert O. Grymes for comments on an earlier draft. This paper reports the general results of research undertaken by Census Bureau Staff. The views expressed are attributable to the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Census Bureau.

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During the last five years, the Census Bureau has initiated an array of important innovations pertaining to family data collected in the decennial census of the population, the Current Population Survey (CPS), and the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). Despite great progress, however, one change was clearly a step backward, and another opportunity for progress has been lost.

For ease of presentation, these Census Bureau initiatives can be classified as pertaining mainly to one of four distinguishable realms of data collection or analysis. In the order discussed here, these are (1) questions concerning family relationships within a household, (2) parent and spouse identifiers, (3) marital history questions, and (4) longitudinal household identifiers. Before discussing innovations in each of these areas, it is useful to describe briefly the unique strengths of each of the three data collection systems that constitute the Census Bureau's major sources of family data.

Three Major Data Collection Systems

The decennial census of the population provides the longest series of historical data on the family situations and living arrangements of Americans. Because of its very large sample size, the census is the only source of detailed family data for the small geographic areas of the Nation, particularly at the state and sub-state level. Also because of its large sample size, the census is the only source of detailed family data for small subgroups of the population, such as American Indians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, Koreans, Asian Indians, and so forth. Since these groups differ greatly in family structure, and since they

are of increasing political and socioeconomic importance to American society, the value of census data for a decennial assessment of changes in the family situations and nonfamily living arrangements of these groups is unique. In addition, Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS) for the 1940 and 1950 censuses have been developed and recently released through a collaborative effort of the University of Wisconsin at Madison and the Census Bureau, with funding from the National Science Foundation. When combined with the PUMS for the 1960, 1970, and 1980 censuses, these census data resources provide a unique opportunity to study the enormous changes in the family that have occurred since the Great Depression, through analyses involving marital history data used in conjunction with other basic census data.[1]

The CPS provides the basis for published annual estimates concerning family relationships dating back to 1947 for the Nation. The unique value of the CPS data is that they provide the longest historical time series for annual assessments of the family situations of Americans, and they do so in conjunction with relatively detailed employment and income data. Funding for the basic CPS is provided in large part by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The CPS also has provided, since 1971, the basis for essentially quinquennial assessments of the marital experience of American adults, based on detailed marital history supplements funded by the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

The SIPP is the Census Bureau's major new data collection system designed to provide extremely detailed information about income and about participation in various government-funded transfer programs for the Nation. Because data are obtained on a month-to-month basis for the same panel of

persons for as long as 32 months, the SIPP provides a unique opportunity to study how specific family changes, since 1984, have been linked to detailed changes in income and program participation. Using an innovative approach to data collection, the SIPP also provides the basis for uniquely detailed assessments of family relationships linking each member of a household to every other member of the household.

Finally, the National Crime Survey, the American Housing Survey, the Health Interview Survey, the Consumer Expenditure Survey, and other major surveys conducted by the Census Bureau, usually for other Federal agencies, are important because they permit analysts to focus on special aspects of family and household life. These surveys are conceptually and structurally similar to the CPS and SIPP regarding household and family data.

Family Relationship Questions

Family relationship data for the U.S. were first obtained by the Census Bureau in the 1890 census. This census included a question about how each household member was related to the "family head" in the household. In 1940, this question was broadened to ask how each household member was related to the "household head." Based on the 1940 data, the Census Bureau began to distinguish related subfamilies within households, an innovation of increasing importance with the rise in divorce, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and associated shifts in family living arrangements.

In 1980, the question was altered to ascertain how each household member was related to one of the members in whose name the home was owned or rented. This reference person is designated as the "householder" in data presentation. For the first time, this concept allowed wives in married-

couple families to be classified as reference persons and hence as householders. The change to the householder concept provided the basis for maintaining a historically consistent time series of family relationship data, and hence of insuring the continued analytical utility of the data, while eliminating any basis for sexist or patriarchal interpretations which sometimes were applied to the earlier concept of "head." Based on current data, the Census Bureau defines a family household as a household including a householder and at least one additional person related to the householder through blood, marriage, or adoption. A subfamily is a family group including a husband-wife relationship, at least one parent-child relationship, or both types of relationships.

Using similar questions, the CPS began in 1947 to provide the basis for published annual estimates concerning family relationships, and since 1984 the SIPP has provided data that might be used to study longitudinal change in family relationships on a month-to-month basis. Through 1980, the relationship to householder data obtained from the census were more detailed than corresponding survey data, but with the innovations of the last five years, each data collection system provides family data that are in some ways more detailed or precise than data provided by one or both of the Census Bureau's other two major sources of family data.

Beginning with innovations that will be implemented in the 1990 census, three major new distinctions will be drawn using pre-coded response categories. First, persons who are the "natural-born or adopted son/daughter" of the householder will be distinguished from persons who are the "stepson/stepdaughter" of the householder. This explicit identification

of stepchildren is quite valuable, because of dramatic increases in divorce, remarriage, and out-of-wedlock childbearing. Second, cohabiting couples will be explicitly identified in 1990 with the pre-coded category of "unmarried partner" in the relationship to householder question. Both opposite sex and same sex couples will be identified based on the responses to this category. Third, "foster child" will be listed (in combination with "roomer" and "boarder") among the response categories to the relationship to householder question. This will provide the basis for a more complete enumeration of foster children than was true in past censuses, a valuable innovation in view of the needs of this small but important group of children.

Turning to innovations in the SIPP, beginning with the 1986 panel, the data separately identify persons who are related to the householder as (1) natural or adopted child, (2) stepchild, (3) foster child, (4) grandchild, (5) parent, (6) brother/sister, and (7) partner/roommate. In the first, 1984 and 1985 SIPP panels, as in the CPS until 1988, categories 1 and 2 were subsumed under "child," categories 4, 5, and 6 were subsumed under "other relatives," and category 3 was subsumed under "nonrelatives" categories. In the 1984 SIPP panel, as in the CPS until 1988, category 7 was subsumed under nonrelatives categories.

With the successful introduction of these response categories in the SIPP, this same set of greatly expanded response categories has been implemented in the CPS. Data from the expanded categories will first be available on the CPS public use data file for March 1989, and then for every month beginning with the July 1989 file.

The SIPP has provided the opportunity to develop and implement an approach

to collecting family relationship data that goes well beyond the conventional approach of the relationship to householder question, by using a matrix to record responses to questions that ask how each member of a household is related to every other member of the household. Not only is the relationship matrix used to explicitly identify all of the family relationships linking every household member, it does so with unprecedented detail, involving twenty-one distinct types of family relationships.

These family relationships are (1) spouse, (2) natural father/mother, (3) stepfather/stepmother, (4) adoptive father/mother, (5) foster father/mother, (6) natural son/daughter, (7) stepson/stepdaughter, (8) adopted son/daughter, (9) foster son/daughter, (10) full brother/sister, (11) half brother/sister, (12) stepbrother/stepsister, (13) adoptive brother/sister, (14) grandfather/grandmother, (15) grandson/granddaughter, (16) uncle/aunt, (17) nephew/niece, (18) father-in-law/mother-in-law, (19) son-in-law/daughter-in-law, (20) brother-in-law/sister-in-law, and (21) cousin.

These SIPP data provide a unique opportunity to study family relationships in households that have many members, that are complex in their family structure, or that are otherwise different from the nuclear family situation with once-married parents and their natural children.

Parent and Spouse Identifiers

During 1982 and 1983, the Census Bureau introduced an improvement in data collection procedures in the CPS that involved explicitly identifying for each household member that person's parent and spouse, if present in the household. Before these new procedures were introduced, an important limitation to the existing survey procedures was that many parent-child and

husband-wife relationships could not be identified unequivocally.

The persons for whom these relationships could not be identified unequivocally were members of related subfamilies living with other family members who own or rent the household unit, or they were living "doubled up" as an unrelated subfamily, that is, unrelated to the person who owned or rented the housing unit and who was listed as the householder. Policy-makers at all levels of government are especially likely to be interested in the number and characteristics of subfamilies, because these subfamilies are likely to be in need of various social and housing services.

The new CPS procedures using parent and spouse identifiers allowed the Census Bureau to identify an additional, estimated 800,000 to 900,000 related subfamilies.[2] Most of this improved measurement was for one-parent families, many of which participate in a variety of special government programs. Since the new procedures were successful in the CPS, they were implemented in the SIPP at its inception, with the fielding of the 1984 SIPP panel. Also in view of the success of these survey procedures, the Census Bureau tested questions in the 1986 National Content Test which provided one important basis for decisions regarding questions to be included in the 1990 census. These test questions asked respondents to explicitly identify one parent-child relationship and one husband-wife relationship (if present) for each person in a household. The questions were effective, but they will not be included in the 1990 census, because of limited available space.

As the number of subfamilies continues to rise, it will become increasingly important to correctly identify as many as possible. Given the strong need among social, economic, and housing policy-makers and policy-

implementors at all levels of government, it is to be hoped that questions needed to explicitly identify all parent-child and husband-wife relationships within households will be included in the year 2000 decennial census, and beyond. Such questions also are important, because a complete and accurate count and characterization of all family units and of all married couples in America, in the context of the census, is not possible without them. With regard to these questions, the 1990 census was an opportunity lost.

Marital History Questions

Marital status data for the U.S. were first obtained by the Census Bureau in the decennial census of 1880, when single, married, and formerly married (widowed or divorced) persons were identified. Similar data have been collected in each subsequent census, but beginning in 1890 widowed and divorced persons were distinguished, and beginning in 1950 separated persons were explicitly identified. These current marital status data were augmented with marital history data as early as 1900.

The censuses of 1900 and 1910 asked the number of years married for currently married persons, and the 1950 census asked the number of years in the current marital status. More importantly, because of the historical series created, the censuses of 1930, 1940, 1960, 1970, and 1980 asked questions about age at first marriage (or equivalently, the date of first marriage). The 1940 data pertain only to women, while the data for later censuses pertain to all persons. In addition, as divorce became increasingly prevalent, the censuses of 1970 and 1980 ascertained whether the first marriage ended though death or divorce. Finally, for women in 1940 and for both men and women in 1950, 1960, 1970, and 1980, each census has asked about

the number of times that the person has ever been married (once or more than once).

The 1990 census will obtain no marital history data. Current marital status data will be obtained as in 1980, but for the first time since 1920, no data will be obtained on age at first marriage; for the first time since 1930, no data will be obtained on number of times married; and for the first time since 1960, no data will be obtained on whether the first marriage was ended by death or divorce. This major loss of marital history data for the Nation, for small geographic areas, and for small but increasingly important subgroups of the population occurred because of competition for limited space on the 1990 questionnaire.

Marital history data are essential for basic descriptions of the complex family circumstances of persons in contemporary America, and for basic analyses of the relationships linking the family and socioeconomic circumstances of persons. The marital history data are especially valuable to policy-makers and to providers of local public services when used in conjunction with the information obtained on current marital status and household relationships.

For example, the relationship to householder question on the 1990 census will provide information on natural and step relationships that link the householder to his or her children, but the marital history question is needed to ascertain the relationship between the householder's spouse and the householder's children. To be more precise, if a particular child is the natural child of the householder, how is the child related to the householder's spouse? With marital history information it often could be

inferred that if the householder's current marriage occurred before the birth of the child, then the child is probably the natural child of the householder's spouse; otherwise, the child is probably the stepchild of the householder's spouse. Such inferences cannot, however, be made without marital history data.

More generally, marital history information is essential to describing the nature of the family situation of persons. A young age at marriage can have important consequences for the welfare of both spouses and their children. Divorce often is extremely disruptive not only for the parents but also for the children involved in it, and remarriages forming blended or stepfamilies can pose sometimes severe difficulties for parents and children who cannot rely upon well-institutionalized, that is, generally accepted, solutions to problems that arise. The death of a spouse or parent also is disruptive, but the implications may be quite different than the implications of a divorce where a potential provider of economic and social support (the former spouse and parent) remains alive.

The decennial census question on marital status obviously is critical to these issues, but marital history information also is essential because the number of currently divorced persons is much smaller than the number ever divorced, and the number of children living with a previously divorced parent is much larger than the number living with a currently divorced parent. Because the social and economic consequences of previous marriages and divorces may continue for many years, or even a lifetime, marital history data are essential to basic descriptions and analyses concerning the family circumstances of adults and children, and they are essential to federal,

state, and local policy-makers and implementors concerned with social, economic, and psychological services for parents and children, as well as such legal matters as child support payments.

Marital history data from the decennial census also are essential to a full understanding of how differences in the evolution of various families lead to different current economic circumstances. The Nation's large-sample marital history data are obtained every five years from the June CPS, but income is not well-measured in the June survey. As a result, the decennial census provides the best data collection system for policy-relevant analyses of the relationship between family history and economic circumstances at the state and local level.

Marital history (and marital status) information also are essential for analyses concerning the Hispanic and Asian communities. The decennial census provides the only sample large enough to study the circumstances of these groups in detail. Since the decennial census is the only major national data collection vehicle for studies concerning the families of specific Hispanic and Asian subgroups, and since these groups are of rapidly increasing importance in the social, economic, and political life of the U.S., there is a rapidly increasing need to include not only marital status but also marital history information on future decennial censuses of the population.

Of course, beginning about twenty years ago, the Census Bureau began obtaining marital history data as part of its current survey program. In 1967 the Census Bureau obtained marital history information (dates of marriage and divorce) for women for as many as two marriages (the first and the last) on the Survey of Economic Opportunity with funding from the Office

of Economic Opportunity. Subsequently, with funding from NICHD, marital history data were collected as part of the June CPS in 1971, 1975, 1980, and 1985.

The data collected in 1971 and 1975 were similar to the data collected in 1967, but marital history data in 1980 were obtained for both women and men, and information on as many as three marriages (the first two marriages and the last) included not only dates of marriage and divorce but also dates of separation. Finally, in 1985 for women the marital history data that were collected were similar to the data collected in 1980, while for men data were collected only for the number of times married and whether the first marriage ended in widowhood or divorce. These CPS data have been extremely valuable for national studies of marriage, separation, and divorce.

More recently, marital history data similar those obtained from the 1980 CPS have been collected once for each panel of the SIPP. Although the SIPP has a much smaller sample size than the CPS, the SIPP data provide a potential opportunity for studies that combine marital history information with the uniquely detailed income and program participation data available on the SIPP.

Despite the immense value of the CPS marital history data, and the great potential of SIPP marital history data for studies of family relationships and family life in America, the absence of marital history data from the 1990 census is a major loss, as discussed above, because the enormous sample size of the census provides a unique basis for detailed studies of relatively small geographic areas and subgroups of the population.

Longitudinal Household Identifiers

One final innovation in family data takes advantage of the longitudinal nature of the SIPP, that is, the fact that the SIPP obtains monthly data from the same persons for up to 32 consecutive months. This feature of SIPP provides the opportunity to develop the first national estimates of the components of household change for the U.S., that is, estimates that pertain to households that continued to exist, that dissolved, and that were newly formed during specified time periods. Since family stability and family change are inextricably tied to household stability and household change, estimates of the components of household change, and associated change in income and program participation, are of great interest to policy-makers and to other students of family life in America.

To facilitate family research of this type, the Census Bureau has developed a longitudinal household concept and associated longitudinal household identifiers. These identifiers are to be included on every SIPP longitudinal data file produced by the Census Bureau for public use. In addition, research on longitudinal household change in SIPP is underway.[3]

Conclusion

With the enormous changes in American family life that have occurred during the twentieth century, the Census Bureau has initiated important innovations in data collection on family relationships in the decennial census, the CPS, and the SIPP. These innovations include developing questionnaire techniques for identifying family relationships within households, for identifying the marital status of persons, and for obtaining detailed information about the marital histories of persons.

During the last five years, innovations have centered on developing

expanded and new approaches to identifying an extremely broad array of family relationships within households, and on developing new approaches to analyzing recently available historical and contemporary data on families. Not all changes during the last five years can be viewed as progress, however. In the 1990 census, for only the second time in the twentieth century, no marital history data will be collected, and, in addition, an important opportunity to explicitly identify parent-child relationships and husband-wife relationships has been lost.

Footnotes

1. For one historical use of these data see my forthcoming census monograph on America's Children, to be published by the Russell Sage Foundation, with funding from the Russell Sage Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and the National Science Foundation.

2. For additional discussion and results see U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 399, Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1984, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1985.

3. "Components of Longitudinal Household Change for 1984-1985: An Evaluation of National Estimates From SIPP," by Donald J. Hernandez, forthcoming in the SIPP Working Paper Series, U.S. Bureau of the Census.